



## **Panentheism: Promises and Problems**

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# Panentheism

## Promises and Problems

Since the 1990s, many publications have appeared on panentheism – the view that “all things exist in God,” even though God is not exhausted by the world of nature. Several disciplines have shaped the discussions – from philosophical theology to science-and-religion dialogues, and more recently, the field of comparative religion. This volume adds to the philosophical resources of panentheism, while further exploring its promises and internal ramifications.

Even though the term “panentheism” was coined by the German Idealist Karl Christian Friedrich Krause in 1829 and developed under the inspiration of F. W. J. Schelling’s philosophy of nature (Göcke 2013), no one has done more to bring the concept of panentheism into broader prominence than Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000). In *Philosophers Speak of God* from 1953, he and William L. Reese presented panentheism as a perennial option in the history of religion, with precursors from the Egyptian religious ruler Akhenaten up to Plato (Hartshorne and Reese 1953, 29–57). They admitted, though, that modern representatives such as F. Schelling, A. N. Whitehead, and C. S. Peirce expressed the vision of panentheism more clearly. In their seminal work, however, one also notices an interest in presenting panentheism as a view capable of transcending the existing borderlines between the major world religions. Among the representatives of modern panentheism, Hartshorne and Reese list philosophers and theologians as different as the Russian-Orthodox Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), the Muslim philosopher and politician Muhammed Iqbal (1877–1938), the Protestant theologian and medical doctor Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), the Jewish thinker Martin Buber (1878–1965), and the Hindu philosopher and statesman Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) (Hartshorne and Reese 1953, 285–310).

One finds a similar, if not even a stronger appeal to the compass of panentheism in a recent anthology, *Panentheism across the World’s Traditions* (Biernacki and Clayton 2014). In her introduction, Loriliai Biernacki argues that the

“new panentheism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is a vision that follows the claims of science toward a universalism. No doubt, this is a religiosity that

eschews particular traditional revelations for the sake of a wider, more encompassing vision as a response to our contemporary shrinking globe, our world in which the contradictions of too many various, incommensurable revelations demand a response, beg for a synthesis” (8–9).

In Biernacki’s view, panentheism promises as “new big vision of the ‘spiritual but not religious’” (8). Here, panentheism is not seen as a distinct philosophical or theological view, but rather as an expression of a global spirituality that is able to draw on resources from different religious traditions. Accordingly, the reader is presented to a broad cluster of panentheistic images with a variety of family resemblances, thus “affirming complementarities rather than forcing final decisions,” as the other editor, Philip Clayton, puts it (201). The promises of panentheism seem inextricably bound up with the weight of its many expressions.

Indeed, it remains an open question whether the fluidity of panentheism constitutes a problem, or is part of its attraction. Sometimes concepts are important heuristic tools by pointing in the right direction, without being able to settle the issues in a fully satisfying way. This triggers the question, to what extent is panentheism a stable concept? Accordingly, there are two ways to proceed: One is to celebrate the manifold expressions of panentheistic imagery in the service of multifarious spiritualities, the other way is to re-specify core commitments of panentheism within distinctive philosophical views. In communicating the concerns of panentheism, we may need a little of both.

In their day, Hartshorne and Reese chose the path of conceptualization. Their view was that even though panentheism takes several forms, it has identifying characteristics, too. Panentheism offers a both comprehensive and integral theological vision: “God as Eternal-Temporal Consciousness, Knowing and Including the World in His Own Actuality [but not Essence]” (Hartshorne and Reese 1953, xiii). Hence the acronym ETCKW. The point is that the inclusion of the world in divine experience certainly affects divine life but does not change the essence of God as the creative and responsive love of all that exists.

According to Hartshorne and Reese, both classical pantheism and classical theism are truncated versions of the richer view of panentheism. Classical pantheism has the following logic: “God as Eternal, Knowing and Including the World [So Far as ‘Real’]”. Hence the acronym ECKW (whereby the extent of the world-inclusion in God depends on what the pantheist thinker regards as real rather than unreal features of the mundane world). Classical theism, in this taxonomy, appears as even more truncated insofar as classical theism also denies the inclusion of the world in God. Here, God is “Eternal

Consciousness, Knowing [but not Including] the World.” Hence the meager acronym ECK for classical theism. As spelled out by Hartshorne in his concluding essay to the volume, there is a substantive “logic of panentheism” (499–514). In Hartshorne’s view, panentheism does more than offer a mediating view between classical theism (which separates God and world into two domains) and pantheism (which identifies God and world). Panentheism is superior to both rivals simply by being more comprehensive in terms of logical compass.

Unfortunately, process philosophers Hartshorne and Reese do not discuss in detail the differences between their dipolar view of God as both eternal and temporal and the view of A. N. Whitehead on whom they otherwise build their concept of panentheism (273–77). According to Whitehead, there is no dipolarity within God, but only between God and world (Bracken 2014a, 5). In *Process and Reality* from 1929, creativity is seen as the ultimate metaphysical principle, sustaining both divine and worldly events: “God and world are the contrasted opposites in terms of which Creativity achieves its supreme task of transforming disjoint multiplicity, with its diversities in opposition, into concrescent unity, with its diversities in contrast” (Whitehead [1929] 1978, 348). God and world are thus two distinct realities standing in a continuous interaction with one another, both influencing, or even “creating” one another. Seminal to both Hartshorne’s and Whitehead’s view is the intuition of a two-way interaction between God and world. God is not only creative but also responsive in relation to what emerges in the course of evolution and creaturely development.

It is, curiously enough, hard to define panentheism via its own name – in terms of “all things being in God.” In fact, the same formula also appears already in the work of the arch-representatives of classical theism and pantheism. Thomas Aquinas uses the metaphor of in-being when saying that “one does use the bodily metaphor and talk of everything being in God inasmuch as God contains them” (*S.Th.* I, q. 8, a. 1 ad sec. = Thomas 1964–65, 2:113). Spinoza contends that “everything is in God,” too (*Ethica* I, prop. 15 = Spinoza 1967, 2:106). Certainly, Thomas and Spinoza would differ on the meaning of this expression. In contrast to panentheism, however, they would say that just as the world cannot affect the being and mind of God (*S.Th.* I, q. 28, a. 1 = Thomas 1964–65, 8:22–27), so particular beings cannot change the immanent cause of Nature, which strictly determines all concrete modes of being (*Ethica* I, prop. 18 and 25 = Spinoza 1967, 2:120, 124).

There are, however, several fruitful ways of understanding the “in-being” of panentheism. The root metaphor is spatial in orientation. But if God is infinite, a spatial metaphor is presupposed while at the same time tran-

scended, since infinity, by definition, cannot be measured. By contrast, the spatial metaphor applies well to the finite beings that belong to, and in this sense are also included within divine life. “Being in God” means being part of a divine community, even to the point of standing in an intimate, internal relation with God. Arthur Peacocke captures this point well by stating, “The ‘in’ metaphor has advantages in this context over the ‘separate but present to’ terminology of divine immanence in Western classical theism. For God is best conceived of as the circumambient reality enclosing all existing entities, structures, and processes, and as operating in and through all, while being ‘more’ than all” (Peacocke 2004, 146).

The question is, then, how to conceive of the relation between God and world. Is it a unilateral relation, or a two-way relation between God and world? In my view, the intuition of a living and reciprocal interrelation is the best candidate for delineating the contours of panentheism, also beyond the particular emphasis of Whiteheadian process philosophy. Indeed, panentheism suggests that there are temporal aspects to divine life, without needing to assume that the past lapses away from divine memory as is the case in finite human minds. The intuition of the two-way relation between God and creatures is exactly what classical theism (*à la* Thomism) and classical pantheism (*à la* Spinozism) emphatically deny; both subscribe strongly to the oneness and sameness of the divine source respectively *natura naturans*.

If one follows this route of defining panentheism, the history of philosophy and religion will have fewer ancient proponents of panentheism than sometimes assumed. In his otherwise impressive study, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers*, John W. Cooper argues, by contrast, for a very long tradition of panentheism in philosophical theology, a tradition going back to Plato and Neo-Platonism (Cooper 2007). However, the extensive use of the metaphor of a divine light (or, Wisdom) illuminating, penetrating, and permeating all created orders does not suggest that there is any enrichment moving backwards, as it were, from world to God. In the Neo-platonic model, God is restlessly productive, but never receptive, hence never relational; even the best reflections of the divine light will only be faint images of the primordial Light.

This constitutes an argument for letting the panentheist movement begin in the nineteenth century CE rather than in the fifth century BCE, or even earlier. Certainly, panentheism may also have a longer prehistory inspired by a Christian theology of love – a love originally predicated only about those promised to become “sharers of divine nature” (1 Pt 1:4) by divine grace. In the Franciscan tradition, we find a particular strong notion of divine love, related to the doctrine of creation, too. Duns Scotus, for example, argues that

God's reason for creating the world was God's desire to have fellow loving beings beyond divine life (*Opus Oxoniense* III, d. 32, q.1, n. 6 = Duns Scotus 2007, 136–39; cf. Müller 2014, 25). In the nineteenth century, such distinctively theological views of the salvific purpose of divine love may have been extended into a general view of a divine relational love towards the universe at large. If so, soteriological visions of “being in God” may have inspired the expressivist pantheisms of the nineteenth century as well as the dipolar pantheisms of process theology in the twentieth century (Gregersen 2004).

In this vein, process theology has also developed new versions of panentheism. In Joseph Bracken's system-oriented approach, divine life is presented as the all-inclusive system that comprehends all creaturely systems, while preserving and sustaining the self-organizational capacities of more limited systems, from atoms and molecules to human societies and ecological systems (Bracken 2014b, 75–89). If God is conceived of as a separate entity (as in classical theism), God remains contrasted to creaturely entities. This is not the case, however, in interacting hierarchical systems, in which the lower-level systems (say, atoms) retain their own causal forces, even though they operate in higher-level systems (say, central nervous systems).

As will become evident in this volume, however, there are further resources for developing pantheist visions. *John R. Shook* undertakes an ambitious attempt at reconstructing C. S. Peirce's philosophical theology. As Shook points out, Peirce's personal conviction leaned towards a fairly transcendent God in the vein of classical theism. Yet, Peirce's attempt at understanding God in relation to the three “universes” of potentiality (firstness), the brute actuality of things (secondness), and the multiple connections and laws between the features of the three universes (thirdness) led him to deal with chance and real time aspects of reality, thus bringing him into the vicinity of panentheism. Shook presents four models for reconstructing Peirce's undeveloped philosophical theology, opting for a dynamical panentheism, without ruling out the traces of classic theism and pantheism that can also be found in Peirce's philosophy.

The next two articles relate panentheism to Christian concepts of the incarnation and Trinity. *Adam Pryor* brings the generative body phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty into communication with the concept of ‘deep incarnation.’ The argument is that Merleau-Ponty's view of the closely woven fabric between bodily sensing and what is sensed as bodily, offers a perspective for speaking of ‘flesh’ as something which is shared between living bodies yet also interlaced in the ongoing interactions between living bodies and things in their life-world. As in Peirce, here as well we find phenomena that criss-cross the borderlines between human perceivers and

things perceived. In the *Fundierung* of perception, so Pryor argues, what is founding and what is founded cannot be separated. Similarly, in the view of deep incarnation, God takes shape in the concrete body of Jesus while also being connected with the world of inter-corporeality.

*Jan-Olav Henriksen* also moves into theological territory when interpreting the triune life as a mutual in-dwelling and co-constitution (*perichoresis*) characterized by a love that extends itself to the world of creation. Yet, speaking of love, and of divine love, is only possible based on experiences fully situated within the world. Against this background, Henriksen argues that the early modern concept of “supernaturalism,” presupposed also in the Evolutionary Cognitive Theory of Religion, is not a sustainable concept, neither in terms of philosophy nor in those of Christian theology. Pantheism points to the fact that love must be embodied in order to be experienced. Moreover, speaking of divine love as a pervasive love requires not only that God become human, but also that this divine self-embodiment is ‘deep’ in the sense of being internally related to the full scope of creation – from atmosphere and water to the precursors of the human species.

The final article by *Kenneth A. Reynhout* offers a critical analysis of standard ramifications of the science-religion dialogue. He argues that the importance of science for theology has been limited due to the attempt of theologians to find a common ground with scientists at the abstract level of epistemology, for example, by assuming ‘critical realism’ as a common starting point. Instead, Reynhout points to the Continental hermeneutical tradition, which continues to be the fundamental paradigm of leading systematic theologians. After all, the business of theologians is not to develop scientific explanations but rather to interpret scientific theories and findings from a theological perspective. Aiming to overcome the explanation vs. understanding dichotomy, he points to the work of Paul Ricoeur as an attempt to understand the world also via explanation. Conversely, also scientific explanations stand in need of interpretation. Reynhout argues that the task of theologians is to seek an understanding of faith through explanation, including scientific explanations.

These essays intend to provoke further discussion of philosophical resources not so often used in the context of science-and-religion discussions. The reviews serve the same purpose.

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